



Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

DECISION NOTICE FLATHEAD LAKE ISLANDS FINAL MANAGEMENT PLAN Effective September 4, 2009

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
1420 East 6th Avenue South
PO Box 200701
Helena, MT 59620-0701

PROPOSAL

The proposal is to adopt the Flathead Lake Islands Final Management Plan and implement the outlined actions as feasible over the next ten years. The islands referred to in the plan include: Wild Horse Island State Park (WHI), and three islands currently categorized as Wildlife Habitat Protection Islands (WHPA): Cedar, Bird and O'Neil (Douglas).

PUBLIC PROCESS

The primary issues and actions outlined in the plan were identified by a public advisory committee who began work in 2003. The planning process stalled while commercial use rules were determined by the Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) Commission and other preliminary management issues were resolved. Draft plans (27 copies), postcards (121) and email notices (112) were sent May 1 to interested parties, as was a FWP statewide press release. The public was also notified of the draft plan via public notice printed May 3 in the *Kalispell Daily InterLake*, *Missoulian*, and *Helena Independent Record*. These publications began a 33-day public comment period ending June 5, 2009. The draft plan and supplemental documents were also posted on the FWP web page with links on several pages and appearing through the full comment period. The public could submit comments via the web page or in writing to the Kalispell FWP Headquarters.

PUBLIC COMMENT

Seven people submitted comments during the thirty-three-day comment period. A summary of topics raised and resulting planning approach is listed below; the final plan was modified accordingly.

Recreation Resources

- Sanitation is of primary concern and must be addressed on Cedar Island prior to allowing overnight use.
- Overnight vehicle parking is available at mainland state parks around Flathead Lake for people wishing to boat to public islands and camp when allowed.
- Overnight use will not be allowed on O'Neill Island due to its small size and associated impacts, including human waste.
- As proposed in the plan, recreational use would be managed to limit resources impacts on Cedar and Bird Islands, including overnight use. Delineating camping sites and limiting use

to six people per site would likely mitigate impacts and perhaps improve conditions over the dispersed use currently occurring. A future environmental assessment will evaluate this proposal more thoroughly.

- Camping would be open to motorized and non-motorized boaters.
- The final plan clarifies that any group of 16 or more must acquire a special use permit. This is consistent with Wild Horse Island State Park policy.
- Additional trails on WHI are not proposed to help conserve the natural and primitive nature of the park experience and wildlife habitat.
- The islands will retain a low level of accessibility for people with disabilities to match the primitive setting and desired recreational experience.

Cultural Resources

- The agency will collaborate with tribes who inhabited the area historically, and the State Historic Preservation Office, prior to implementing actions which may impact cultural resources on the islands.
- In accordance with ARM 12.8.501-507, the future state of buildings on Cedar Island will be determined after a cultural inventory has been conducted and alternatives researched. The State Historic Preservation Office will be consulted, as will the public. In addition to the structures' historic significance, the agency will also consider these issues when determining future actions: public safety, costs and budgets, feasibility, social and environmental impacts.

Wildlife Resources

- Overall, wildlife habitat on Wild Horse Island has not deteriorated according to the Regional Wildlife Manager. Though conditions change over time, ungulate populations remain stable and the Palouse Prairie system habitat has improved since FWP has owned the island. Mitigation measures for wildlife related issues will be addressed according to state or species management policies.
- Helicopter netting is nationally recognized as the most efficient, humane and successful means of trapping and transporting bighorn sheep. Sheep removal is necessary to regulate populations appropriate for the available island habitat.
- Mule deer populations will naturally disperse (swim the lake) if population densities rise above the natural threshold. FWP does not trap and transport deer in Montana due to the risk of transmitting Chronic Wasting Disease. Diseases are most likely to occur when ungulates are artificially crowded. The eye infection conjunctivitis, for example, can be spread when ungulates crowd around human supplied grain feeders, thus feeding is now an illegal activity.
- Proposed management of human use and waste, designating camping sites and managing group use is intended to maintain or improve vegetation and soil conditions on the WHPA islands.

Pets

- As stated in the draft plan, pets will not be allowed on the WHPA islands except during waterfowl hunting season, when dogs may be utilized for hunting purposes. This regulation is intended to reduce pet conflicts with users and wildlife, and limit pet related waste.

Primitive Parks Designation

- WHI is the only island designated as a Primitive Park (MCA 23-1-116). This law limits new developments at WHI, but does not prevent responsible property management such as: maintaining existing facilities, managing the natural landscape (like weed and pest control), wildlife management actions and habitat restoration projects.

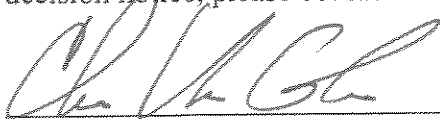
Administration

- The Actions listed and timeline proposed in this plan illustrate the priorities suggested by the advisory committee and the agency at this time. Prerequisite actions, research, funding and opportunities may influence the feasibility or sequence of the proposed actions.
- Transferring federal aid encumbrance out of the WHPA islands is a high priority in the next two to three years; recreation management expenses will be minimized until this transfer can be accomplished.
- Developing standards and indicators for the Limits of Acceptable Change (LAC) will be a primary focus when the plan is adopted. Many actions hinge on monitoring impacts and identifying key indicators.
- Commercial use on the islands may be allowed in the future. The agency will develop policy that equitably evaluates commercial use proposals to ensure activities are safe, compatible with the goals of conserving island resources, and maintain or improve the target recreational experiences on the islands. The draft plan errantly referred to providing equitable access to the islands; as a state park, all people (public, private, commercial) are allowed access *to* the islands. The Commercial Use Rules (ARM 12.14.101) clearly exempt commercial services that shuttle people or vehicles (to the island). The state, however, does have the authority to regulate activities occurring *on* state-owned land (emphasis added).
- Additional zoning maps, visitation tables, and comprehensive rule/law text used for planning are readily available as supplemental documents, but were not included in the plan to minimize document size.
- Determining if a “no wake” zone is needed at Skeeko Bay is outside the scope of this plan.
- FWP staff will continue attending WHI landowners association annual meetings and will inform landowners and interested parties of proposed projects prior to implementation as required by the Montana Environmental Policy Act. Public comments are welcome at any time. The public can contact FWP staff at 406-752-5501, Kalispell.

DECISION

It is my decision to implement the final plan as proposed combined with the above determinations, having considered all comments. In accordance with state and federal policy, environmental analyses will evaluate impacts of qualifying individual actions. The public will be asked to provide additional input to these actions.

The plan is subject to appeal, which must be submitted to the Director in writing, and postmarked within 30 days of the date on this decision notice. The appeal must specifically describe the basis for the appeal, explain how the appellant has previously commented to the department or participated in the decision-making process, and lay out how FWP might address the concerns in the appeal. The appeal should be mailed to: Director, Fish, Wildlife & Parks, PO Box 200701, 1420 East 6th Avenue, Helena, MT 59620. If you have questions regarding this decision notice, please contact the Parks Division at (406) 444-3750.



Chas Van Genderen, Parks Division Administrator
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks